

Governor's Message to Kansans

One of my great pleasures as governor is the opportunity to work with individuals, groups and teams of Kansans who are creative, enthusiastic and dedicated to our state. Their ideas will help lead us to a successful future

The Rural Life Task Force is a sterling example of such a group. Members of the task force were asked to examine ways to preserve, renew and sustain the value of rural Kansas in the economic and cultural life of Kansas.



These 43 Kansans brought diverse areas of expertise and talents together to formulate stories of the past, present and future of rural Kansas. In meetings last fall at the Kansas Sampler Center near Inman, they gave their time and focus to develop these road maps for future policy initiatives.

The task force issue teams discussed different facets of rural Kansas cares and concerns. Topics were energy, infrastructure, health, human services, agriculture, diversified economy, government and community empowerment. This report contains the story that was developed on each of these issues.

The work of the task force is not complete, and I will call on its members to guide and advise me throughout my administration. This book of stories will be a guide for my rural initiatives, but it is a living document. New ideas are welcomed.

I am grateful to the members of the Rural Life Task Force for their dedication and service to our great state. I look forward to working with them and with all Kansans to help create a bright future for rural Kansas.

Kathleen Sebelius
Governor of Kansas

Introduction

At the direction of Governor Kathleen Sebelius, in the fall of 2003 more than 40 Kansans agreed to sit down together to talk about the issues affecting rural Kansas, and to cooperatively develop plans for a successful rural future.

Members of the Governor's Rural Life Task Force began their work with the help of a facilitator who guided issue teams into telling the "stories" of the many facets of rural Kansas life: agriculture, community empowerment, diversified economy, energy, health care, human services, infrastructure and rural government.

Some team members were experts on a particular issue. Others were experts at rural living, who care about rural Kansas, about their elderly mothers who want to stay in their homes as long as possible, about conserving resources, or inspiring bright young people to come home to lead the community or coach basketball or take meals on wheels to the lonely elderly. The KU Public Management Center provided their expertise on meeting facilitation and story construction.

The impetus for the "future" of the stories—a vision of what rural Kansas should be and can become—was a guided look at the past and the present. No future plans can be built without a measured look at the past..

As one task force member said, Kansas should encourage young people, retirees and tourists alike to "come home to the stars" of this state. Over and over, task force members noted the vast starlit skies, diverse topography and abundant sun and varied seasons as strengths for rural Kansas.

The stories that were developed may seem simple, but they are not. They came from the energy and ideas of people who care about Kansas and understand the special promise that rural Kansas gave to our ancestors and can provide for our children and grandchildren.

Some common ideas came from each issue group as they talked around the table at the Kansas Sampler Center near Inman. It is an honor to summarize these ideas and to offer all the teams' stories of the past, present and, possibly, a vibrant future of rural Kansas.

The task force will continue to work on particular issues to find pathways to success for rural Kansas.

Summary

Common elements emerged in all discussions and affect many segments of rural life. Recurring elements included discussion of the necessity of areas "clustering" together to access technology, insurance or basic government services. Several issue teams referenced economic difficulties exacerbated by human service needs, such as access to affordable insurance or rural health care. Housing needs affect the poor, the elderly, the new immigrants, and business decisions to settle in an





area. Problems for agriculture and the energy industry affect rural and urban residents alike.

Some of the action points identified by the various issue teams follow.

Agriculture

- Pursue liability legislation related to agricultural tourism.
- Make health insurance affordable for farmers.
- Bring in marketing professionals to help strategize a plan for Kansas agricultural tourism.
- Use commodity commissions, with their checkoff funds, to help market Kansas products.
- Review the position of Kansas products within commodity agriculture and implement tangible programs to upgrade the quality of commodities. Market Kansas commodities on the basis of quality.
- Review rules and regulations regarding direct-marketed and value-added agricultural commodities, with an eye toward increasing efforts in that area.

Community Empowerment

- Scrutinize the distribution of EDIF money through the state. Most believe it is not being returned to rural communities on an equitable basis.
- Establish a mentor/model clearinghouse through which businesses that have achieved success may share their techniques and wisdom.
- Establish an Office of Small Community Sustainability, through which small business leaders may unite.
- Establish a Kansas Products Warehouse through which small Kansas businesses could obtain products to sell.
- Explore and encourage the development of financial resources for economic development in many ways, including: Provide incentives for local business development. ~ Use state loan guarantees to provide local capital. ~ Authorize bonding authorities to finance local ventures. ~ Shift the emphasis away from large-scale manufacturing toward small-scale business. ~ Change the tax structure to allow retailers to play by the same rules as manufacturers. ~ Support revolving loan programs. ~ Loosen the state procurement code to simplify and expedite grant/contract acquisition. ~ Consider a program like the “chickadee checkoff” on state income tax forms to allow Kansans to contribute to rural entrepreneurial investment.
- Promote a marketing campaign that tells the story of the Governor’s Rural Life Task Force, relates specific success stories

and empowerment victories, and encourages venture capitalists to invest in rural Kansas. Important case studies would include the Courtland Art Center, the new Russell women's clothing store, the Kuhn family orchard, Courtland and Butler County's "buy locally" campaigns, and Will Carpenter's grocery store mentoring program.

Diversified Economy

- Develop incentives for investing in small business through Kansas Small Business Development Centers.
- Call on the state's universities, community colleges, and technical schools to provide services that will train rural people.
- Establish a statewide resources center/clearinghouse (Rural Economic Center) with a toll-free number and website for sharing of resources.
- Promote a system of "angel investors" through meetings to showcase rural potential.
- Enrich and promote the Santa Fe Trail.
- Establish a School of Rural Entrepreneurship.
- Encourage all Kansas banks to become interested in agricultural and entrepreneurial-oriented businesses.

Energy

- Support an energy plan for Kansas.
- Focus efforts on regionalized energy policy and production.
- Support the continuance and augmentation of the State Energy Resources Coordination Council (SERCC).
- Support SERCC's work to institutionalize the development of a comprehensive and coordinated energy policy for Kansas, including wind energy, ethanol, coalbed methane and tertiary oil recovery.
- The state should develop a proactive and adequate regulatory program to guide development of new energy sources at their birth, rather than being forced to focus on cleanup and remediation as these resources wane.
- Consider financing needed energy action with severance tax revenues associated with new development.
- Increase the focus on energy conservation and efficiency.

Health Care

- Uniform insurance forms.
- A review of insurance regulations.
- Effective, fair allocation of health care resources
- Risk-based insurance premiums.
- Consider further bans on smoking in public areas.





- A fully funded Kansas Senior Care Act with in-home health care provisions.
- Addressing the cost of prescription drugs.
- Means to link health care centers (communication, transportation, other accessibility).
- A center for marketing and recruitment of medical, nursing, and allied health professionals.
- Ensuring that health care (emergency care at a minimum) is provided to all Kansans, especially children and the elderly.
- A “services bank” so people can volunteer their help for the needy.
- A governor’s Good Health Program with incentives for communities that set health goals.
- A “meals on wheels”-style program that mails preserved foods to elderly people who are not served at this time because of their rural locations.
- Consideration of community-based health plans.

Human Services

- Form a Kansas Housing Finance Agency and make mortgage revenue bonds and other housing finance options and programs available statewide. Support Senate Bill 222 in the 2004 legislative session, or similar legislation designed to help low- and moderate-income families to purchase homes.
- Hold a statewide assessment of need.
- Create more human service coalitions.
- Fully fund the Senior Care Act.
- Publicize existing programs, such as Heartland Share.
- Initiate community conversations about empowerment. Help rural communities learn what has worked in other towns to enable communities to make informed decisions.
- Explore new models of senior housing at all ranges between independent living, assisted living, and skilled care in nursing homes.
- Ask major corporations to decentralize, allowing employees or employee groups to relocate to and work from small towns.
- Develop a program to supplement the cost of prescription drugs.

Infrastructure

- The use patterns of rural roads should be analyzed to determine if costs of town or county maintenance efforts are justified.
- Communities should consider clustering together to access services for their common areas, such as telecommunications and broadband Internet services.
- Mortgage lending bonds should be made available statewide.

- The use of geographic information systems should be encouraged to analyze the infrastructure needs of rural Kansas.
- Water quality and quantity should be protected.

Rural Government

- Implement a program of Rural Economic and Community Development designed to stabilize and build rural economies and populations.
- Make sure that rural counties get their fair share of the Economic Development Incentive Funds (EDIF) collected through the Kansas lottery.
- Celebrate existing examples of outstanding rural government leadership and innovation and share them widely as inspiration to others. Duplicate specific successful strategies in other jurisdictions when appropriate.
- Develop a permanent, statewide town meeting-style program of education about successful rural development, stabilization, and governance strategies, including exchanges among existing rural city and county staffs, to increase knowledge and awareness on specific issues. Hold brainstorming/strategy sessions, open to the public, with key elected officials always present.
- Require or enable city and county officials to get training through the Kansas Association of Counties, the League of Kansas Municipalities, other professional associations, and universities. Fund that training.
- Include rural governance in school curricula at all levels.
- Make the “Kids Vote” program more widespread.
- Make professional mediators available for all communities in conflict with one another if they request mediation.
- When considering alliances, partnerships, or consolidation, do it within a “do no harm” imperative; there can be no loss of political power, revenue, or economic activity that would imperil a rural community.
- Remove obstacles to public service by raising the salaries of some rural officials, such as county commissioners, so they are paid a better level of compensation. Incentives will encourage public officials to obtain continuing education and to network.





Issue Teams

Rural Life Task Force members were selected by Governor Sebelius for their energy, enthusiasm and dedication to all facets of rural Kansas. They represent different communities, professions and memberships, and they share a commitment to rural Kansas.

Agriculture and Diversified Economy

Brian Dunn, St. John; Galen Fink, Manhattan; Henry Gardiner, Ashland; Jay Garetson, Copeland; Gary Gore, Great Bend; Brenda Johnson, McDonald; Sharla Krenzel, Leoti; Roger Masenthin, Harper; Lynn Rundle, Manhattan; Terryl Spiker, Syracuse; and Dan Thalmann, Linn.

Energy and Infrastructure

John Cyr, Beloit; Dave Govert, Cunningham; Joe King, Lawrence; Mike Klein, Dodge City; Laura McClure, Osborne; Jerry McReynolds, Woodston; Gene Merry, Burlington; Tim Peterson, Monument; Nancy Spiegel, Formoso; Shirley Strnad, Scandia; and Ted Wary, Columbus.

Government and Community Empowerment

Liz Hendricks, Howard; Mike Mayberry, Kiowa; Will Carpenter, El Dorado; Lori Fink, Manhattan; Gary Hobbie, Russell; Carla Kuhn, Jametown; Sally Hatcher, Leavenworth; Michele Flax, Overland Park; Robert Cole, Wamego; Reynaldo Mesa, Garden City; and Faye Minium, Morland.

Health and Human Services

Shawn Pine Bay, Lawrence; Tom Bishop, Nortonville; Gary Kilgore, Chanute; Scott Moore, Ellsworth; Susan Mueller, Burlington; John Osse, Beloit; Marvin Penner, Hesston; Debbie Richter, Lindsborg; Marcia Walsh, Onaga; and Grace Webdell, Holcomb.

Task Force Steering Committee

Teams were led by the Task Force Steering Committee, which includes cochairs Marci Penner, Kansas Sampler Foundation, Inman, and Dan Nagengast, The Kansas Rural Center, Lawrence, with representation from the governor's office by Secretary of Agriculture Adrian Polansky and Kansas Water Office Director Joe Harkins.

The Story of Rural Kansas: Agriculture

The Past

Native American Indians grew and gathered crops in fertile areas of Kansas long before settlers of European descent arrived to stay. The acquisition of horses allowed some Native Americans to evolve into more efficient hunters, as well.

Before the 1880s, Kansas was free range territory. Herdsmen grazed sheep and cowboys drove cattle freely through much of the state. The Homestead Act and the railroads brought greater influxes of Eastern and European settlers to more permanent farms, ranches and towns in the 1860s.

In 1874, Mennonites brought Turkey Hard Red Winter Wheat to their settlements, and the foundation was laid for today's "Wheat State" designation. A quarantine instituted against Texas fever stopped the great cattle drives from coming through the state in the 1880s.

The early 1900s, when rain was plentiful, were considered a golden era for Kansas agriculture. They were the opposite of conditions which occurred during the Depression, the Dust Bowl and into the World War II years.

Kansans never exclusively practiced subsistence farming; even the earliest farmers sold some of their products in order to purchase other goods and services. Early agriculture was usually diversified. Over time, farmers began to specialize and raise just one or two crops year after year. The most recent trend for some farmers is again toward diversification in the interest of healthy crops and topsoil conservation.

Irrigation became widespread in the 1950s, the same period when cattle stockyards and feedlots became more commonplace, especially in western Kansas. When oil was discovered on some farm land, the proceeds were a valuable supplement to landowners' financial well-being. In the 1960s and '70s, farmers could leverage their operations to borrow capital. In the 1980s and '90s, there was a lower equity-to-debt ratio than today, when the 70/30 ratio is a drawback. In today's competitive environment, farmers cannot have a high debt-to-asset ratio and remain profitable or economically viable.

In earlier days, both spouses worked on the farm and the farm's income was able to sustain the family. Increasingly, one or both spouses must have jobs off the farm to allow the family to continue in agriculture and to provide for such essentials as health insurance.

Federal programs such as crop set-asides have long been vital to farmers' financial security. Federal farm programs have had an underlying effect on cropping practices and have provided some viability and stability to the agricultural economy and to farmers' financial security.

Decreasing profit margins, and increased efficiency leading to continual consolidation in agricultural operations, make it difficult





economically for some children to return to a family farm business; often they are encouraged to look elsewhere for opportunities.

Present Strengths

The human component of Kansas' agricultural society is perhaps its greatest strength. This includes pride, a sense of place, creativity, a tenacious stick-with-it attitude, adaptability to the land, independence, a strong work ethic, and a near-spiritual awareness of the value of the land.

Farmers and ranchers are willing cooperators in Kansas, and most Kansans have respect for agriculture, unlike some other states. Strong family-based banks are willing to help with agricultural needs because they recognize human capital. Natural resources such as good soil, water supplies, wind, and sparsely populated open spaces provide a wonderful agricultural foundation; there is no better place to raise beef cattle, and the environment has proven equally suitable for dairies.

The increasing use of wind turbines for power generation and the presence of the oil industry enhance agriculture. Kansas' location in the center of the country makes transportation viable. Most of the state's roads are excellent, although upgrading some highways to four lanes would be an improvement. An influx of immigrant workers for the meat-packing industry has sustained the agricultural economy. And perhaps most important, the quality of Kansas agricultural products is superior.

Present Weaknesses

Support for commodity agriculture is declining as fewer people understand agriculture and farming. There also is a serious disconnect between the wholesale and retail aspects of agriculture, such as what it costs to raise top-quality wheat versus the price of a loaf of bread to the consumer. As a result of these and other factors, farm incomes are imperiled and one or both spouses often must hold jobs off the farm just to remain solvent.

Since Kansas farmers traditionally grow commodity crops, many have not needed to focus on marketing their agricultural products. Sometimes the state's agriculturists don't know how they want to be perceived or positioned in a changing world.

The nation's farmers are committed to a world commodity market and compete with countries that have lower costs of production due to cheaper labor, land and inputs. Additionally, increasing regulations and rules add to the cost of production but are demanded to protect resources and consumer confidence in agricultural products.

There is a drain of population as young people turn away from farming and older people retire elsewhere, taking their money out of the rural economy. In some areas, land is being purchased by urban residents for hunting. These owners have no long-standing ties to the land and therefore don't take a great interest in the rural communities.

The trend away from locally owned banks has disrupted traditional partnerships between farmers and financiers. Bank boards can be useful, but they can hinder the livelihood of farmers.

The Future

Serious efforts will be made to educate Kansans and non-Kansans alike about the value of agriculture to the economies of Kansas, the United States and the world. Through these educational efforts, Kansas agriculturists will determine how they want to position themselves, how they want to be perceived, and how they want to market their products. Agricultural marketing will focus on more than commodity crops; Kansas agriculture can be marketed as the “cutting edge of bioscience,” as a leader in value-added products, and as a renewable energy source. The watchword will be the quality of Kansas products—and higher quality should bring higher prices.

More programs will be implemented to attract and stimulate young farmers. There will be more cash rent and custom farming by non-landowners, more dairy farming, and more milling of wheat. There will be more land holdings by non-farmers, causing farm operators to look at different types of leases or at custom-farming more acres. Kansans will look for new ways to process or add value to agricultural products from the state. The state will find ways to make “guest workers”—immigrants—legal residents to improve the quality of their lives, root them and their families in the community, and become fully functioning members of Kansas society.

Agricultural tourism will become more prevalent, as will large production units for animals. This will require a multifaceted plan: transportation into rural areas, including public transit, will be improved, and more attention will be paid to rural recreational areas on public land, including rails-to-trails, and other land uses that could bring tourist dollars. Hunting trips and birding outings will be marketed on private land. A warehouse of Kansas products for central distribution would make the products more readily available for consumer purchase.

More rural Kansans will look at wind power and biomass as sources of renewable energy and to augment their finances. Efficient use of water will increase in importance to the rural community.

Kansas’ rural people are at a watershed time. They are looking at new ways to grow and be flexible. Kansans will diversify their operations with value-added products, including agricultural by-products, and try to improve their return from the marketplace.

Action Steps

- Pursue liability legislation related to agricultural tourism.
- Make health insurance affordable for farmers.
- Bring in marketing professionals to help strategize a plan for Kansas agricultural tourism.





- Use commodity commissions, with their checkoff funds, to help market Kansas products.
- Review the position of Kansas products within commodity agriculture and implement tangible programs to upgrade the quality of commodities. Market Kansas commodities on the basis of quality.
- Review rules and regulations regarding direct-marketed and value-added agricultural commodities, with an eye toward increasing efforts in that area.

The Story of Rural Kansas: Community Empowerment

The Past

The earliest residents of Kansas were tribes of Native American Indian peoples who lived in tightly knit, usually nomadic, communities. They paid little attention to organized boundaries of towns, counties or states.

Much later settlement was spurred by energetic marketing campaigns to Europeans and residents of the eastern U.S. by the railroads in the 1850s. People settled and formed communities to share their resources of provisions, strength, society and safety.

In the early days, everything about a community or rural area was local, from churches to barn-raising. If a community didn't offer something, it wasn't necessary. Farm people were isolated during the week, but would cluster on the weekends in town for social contact.

As the state's population became more mobile, community began to seem less necessary. Some think the pervasive use of automobiles, residential air conditioning, and television have contributed to the erosion of a sense of community. Others believe the trend toward working in large offices during the week caused people to want quiet and solitude on the weekend, further eroding social structures. The evolution of large corporations with an emphasis on economies of scale had an effect, as well. Subdivisions, big-box stores, and large schools signaled change, not always for the good.

Historic preservation is linked with community empowerment. The 1966 Historic Preservation Act and the historic preservation alliances that have ensued can foster a community's desire to enliven its future through ties with its past.

The pattern seems to be that a sense of urgency, often fostered by a crisis of nature or of the economy, mobilizes people, unites and empowers them. In that way, some towns that were struggling or dying can still become centers of empowerment. The Rural Life Task Force feels a certain optimism. Even a decade ago, many Kansas communities were mired in a sense of hopelessness; today, more communities now seem poised to become self-empowered.

Present Strengths

"We are not wimps," said one member of the task force. In many ways, that summarizes the greatest strength of rural communities that leads to their empowerment. People need gumption and desire, pride and faith in what the community might become, to live successfully in a rural area. Successful rural Kansans have an all-for-one, one-for-all attitude, along with a healthy portion of the wisdom that makes people realize everyone must try to get along.





Rural people learn to forgive, to pull together in times of tragedy, and to work hard. They are innovative and can manage, at least for a while, on next-to-nothing in resources and finances. Many rural residents are multi-talented, which is an outgrowth of the farm culture. They are rooted, often for generations, in the same place, and have a sense of ownership—“This is my town.” People who have moved away are valuable allies if communication links with the old “hometown” are maintained.

In terms of institutions, locally owned banks are invested in their towns and willing to provide resources to make new things happen. Locally owned cafés, dress shops, grain elevators, and other businesses provide customer-friendly service and are accountable to their clients. Local newspapers and radio also have a sense of accountability. It is a concern, however, when locally owned media and businesses decline in number. Churches are viewed as natural cheerleaders for the well-being of their communities. Extension programs touch many lives and provide great leadership. The school systems generally are good and there are many affordable community colleges and universities.

Some rural areas are becoming quite adept at marketing themselves, such as the Salina-to-Hays “Amazing 100 Miles” corridor and the Solomon Valley Heritage Alliance.

Other identified strengths include quality of local utilities, a more dignified life for low-income people than they would have in some urban settings, the talent and energy of Hispanic and other new immigrants, the altruism of fire department and emergency medical technician volunteers, the safety of rural spaces, the relative affordability of opening a business or buying land and housing, and the lure of open spaces to people who fancy the outdoors.

Present Weaknesses

Some may see rural Kansas as “a problem to be solved” rather than “an opportunity to be seized.” Some decisions have been based on historical patterns of development which may not be relevant to the future. Some actions have been based on trying to mitigate negative changes to the historical patterns. Instead, Kansans should rather concentrate on how to imagine new futures while using and marketing the very real strengths inherent in rural life.

These strengths make many rural areas of Kansas great places to live and work, regardless of the industry or business being undertaken. Modern technology makes nearly every business possible in a rural location.

One serious weakness centers on the aging population and the death, retirement, or outward migration of landowners. If land is sold, absentee landowners may not care about the rural environment or nearby community. Without talented younger people, the longtime residents who lead communities and help other residents may finally reach burnout.

The task force expressed concerns that many rural residents do not seem to recognize the power of their purchasing choices. To patronize a new chain super center for groceries, clothes or hardware, for instance, inevitably jeopardizes the local dress shop, hardware store, and grocery. Some decry the loss of local businesses, but continue to patronize the mega-stores.

People do not stroll the downtowns as they once did, resulting in loss of personal contact between town and country residents. Some are resistant to the arts, and to innovative ideas on programs that could put a town on the map. This relates to a general closed-mindedness and fear of change that can harm a community.

Some aging leaders stay in positions of authority rather than gracefully passing on the torch, if there are younger persons to whom the torch can be passed. People may be prideful and reluctant to ask for help. Some local merchants don't provide good customer service to compete with new businesses, including expanded hours and cleanliness, because they believe they have a captive clientele. Local governments may be excessively frugal and reluctant to part with money that would reap huge rewards in the long run. A flip side to the many benefits of close-knit communities can be a lack of privacy and an extraordinary amount of gossip and rumor.

The rural infrastructures are aging. Many social services are required, especially for residents who move to rural areas to find affordable housing. Other weaknesses include the awkwardness of dealing with two different time zones between the west and east, and the length of time it takes to travel to urban centers, including Topeka for legislative matters.

A final but important weakness may be that "community" has become too narrowly defined.

The Future

Kansas forebears were idealists and visionaries who imagined a "free state," helped fight a bloody war to ensure that it was free, and then created a robust culture and economy where there previously had been wilderness. The Rural Life Task Force re-imagines a future as robust and ambitious as the original, but rooted in the changed circumstances of the present. The governments and leaders of Kansas, at every level, will begin to imagine a different future in rural Kansas and set out to create it. They will nurture and encourage advocates of the virtues of rural life and champion new businesses.

To reverse the narrow definition of "community," Kansans will form alliances or clusters to pool human and financial resources and create productive, creative change. One mechanism will be to build economies of scale through buying cooperatives. The ideas could encompass everything, from grain elevators to women's clothing boutiques.





Another mechanism will be to share expertise, such as mentoring/role modeling clearinghouses that will teach community leaders how to find and secure federal funding and foundation grants. Another will be apprenticeship programs in which prospective business owners can learn both about potential pitfalls and potential keys to success from those who have been there before them. Conferences for the purpose of sharing success stories will promote group energy. Town meetings will help communities learn more about their history and their potential. Mediators will help feuding communities get past their differences.

Community leaders will learn to lead by example, especially with their children—promoting change, being positive about their town’s future, and boldly taking risks. They will begin to look for volunteers in unlikely places, such as enlisting the help of at-risk youths at the Courtland Arts Center. They will become proficient at sharing their success stories to inspire each other. They will understand the importance of viewing all residents as potential economic developers and training them to act that way. They will remove negative thinkers from their governing boards; replace them with creative, positive people; and encourage rotation of leadership. They will intentionally create places for positive public discourse, such as farmers’ markets and art centers. More communities will participate in the Main Street program. Small farmers will begin to hold entrepreneurial agriculture conferences.

Marketing of the quality of rural Kansas will become paramount. This includes quality of life and of rural products. Because local business owners can’t really promote themselves, leaders will develop advocacy groups that can encourage the patronage of small businesses in a “reinvention of retailing.” This includes stores staying open for longer hours, accepting credit cards, providing delivery services, establishing retail niches, and sharing merchandise.

Rural Kansans will actively lure filmmakers to shoot in the small towns. Presentations for venture capitalists (“angel investors”) will allow would-be entrepreneurs to present their business plans and win funding. Driving tours will bring urban residents to see Kansas’ natural wonders and small towns. Websites will advertise housing, historic buildings, and quality Kansas products for sale.

The potential of agricultural tourism will begin to be tapped through expanded creativity. A case study is the apple orchard that evolved to selling cider and beyond, providing a “rural experience” for families and children, showing fall decorating schemes, and continuing new and innovative offerings.

Because of the aging rural infrastructures, and to foster the growth of innovative enterprises, more venture capital must become available to rural Kansas. Much of that can occur through local energy and drive, but the state of Kansas also must play an active role.

Action Steps

- Scrutinize the distribution of EDIF money through the state. Most believe it is not being returned to rural communities on an equitable basis.
- Establish a mentor/model clearinghouse through which businesses that have achieved success may share their techniques and wisdom.
- Establish an Office of Small Community Sustainability through which small business leaders may unite.
- Establish a Kansas Products Warehouse through which small Kansas businesses could obtain products to sell.
- Explore and encourage the development of financial resources for economic development in many ways, including: Provide incentives for local business development. ~ Use state loan guarantees to provide local capital. ~ Authorize bonding authorities to finance local ventures. ~ Shift the emphasis away from large-scale manufacturing toward small-scale business. ~ Change the tax structure to allow retailers to play by the same rules as manufacturers. ~ Support revolving loan programs. ~ Loosen the state procurement code to simplify and expedite grant/contract acquisition. ~ Consider a program like the “chickadee checkoff” on state income tax forms to allow Kansans to contribute to rural entrepreneurial investment.
- Promote a marketing campaign that tells the story of the Governor’s Rural Life Task Force, relates specific success stories and empowerment victories, and encourages venture capitalists to invest in rural Kansas. Important case studies would include the Courtland Art Center, the new Russell’s women’s clothing store, the Kuhn family cider mill, Courtland and Butler County’s “buy locally” campaigns, and Will Carpenter’s grocery store mentoring program.





The Story of Rural Kansas: Diversified Economy

The Past

Trading and supply posts were among the earliest means of trade and commerce as settlement began in Kansas. The Santa Fe Trail was the first commercial route, along which many people traveled from east to west.

The state's economic development was spurred in various ways across the years. Among the agents bringing economic development and change have been the railroads, the rise of Kansas State University and the Extension system, the development and use of irrigation in the west, the manufacture of farm implements, rural electric cooperatives, the Wichita aviation industry cluster, the transformation of abandoned military bases into industrial parks, the Interstate highway system, the arrival of feedlots and explosion of the beef industry, and the expansion into the large-scale dairy industry. In more modern years, the Department of Agriculture, followed by the Department of Commerce, became active promoters of the rural economy.

Kansas was early to recognize and empower women, which has had an effect on the economic, governmental and social environment of the state.

In recent years, shopping has become a common form of entertainment. Regional market hubs have been developed, offering longer hours of operation and a wider variety of products than traditional Main Street businesses. Large “predatory” retailers have become more common in these regional market hubs, creating competitive imbalance for smaller, independent retailers. The “Wal-Mart phenomenon,” and its impact on city centers, continues to be a source of concern for rural Kansans.

Present Strengths

There is an increasing demand for “bio-products,” and Kansas has an abundance of biomass and the ability to produce ethanol and biodiesel. Cottage industries are springing up. There is a strong work ethic, and rural Kansans tend to be inventive.

As nature-based tourism gains in popularity, the state's varied topography and abundance of natural beauty carry great potential for tourism, as does the state's climate, with plentiful sun and four distinct seasons, and rich history. Kansas has abundant natural resources and a great potential for wind power.

The state has an excellent highway and transportation system, and is well-positioned geographically. Kansas' educational systems are good, with vocational skills taught for the state's technology industries.

Other strengths include diversity in ethnic populations, with cultural and historic elements fostering tourism; high-quality products; large

numbers of industrial parks ready to be used; and the availability of grants for rural economic development. Particularly in eastern Kansas, off-farm jobs sometimes are available to supplement family finances.

Present Weaknesses

Because Kansas is in the center of the country, its agricultural producers are far from many of the nation's consumers.

The state has a reputation for inclement weather, which is not always deserved.

The Kansas system of signs and billboards is inadequate and should be changed to benefit local businesses and tourist destinations. A few Kansans have a negative mind-set about welcoming newcomers, including tourists.

The state Department of Commerce's procedures for job development focus disproportionately on large-scale employers, and insufficiently on small businesses, agriculture-related industries, and other entities that would boost the economy of rural Kansas.

Start-up and maintenance capital is lacking. Retirees who leave the state take their savings with them. Major convention centers are too far away from much of rural Kansas. Rural areas lack comprehensive communication systems, and need universal access to broadband communication. Some truckers view fuel costs, road tolls, and regulation of truck size as negatives about the state of Kansas.

The task force noted that Kansas is 49th in the country in dollars spent to promote tourism at \$300,000 annually. This is a serious issue. The goal should be to keep Kansas money in Kansas, and attract further dollars from outside.

The Future

Kansas will develop a statewide plan for tourism that makes sense to rural Kansas, too. Components of the plan will include better signage, including historical markers; driving tours; a link between the state's agricultural heritage and the country's food; quality as a byword; the encouragement of homegrown entrepreneurs through state policies; the establishment of central distribution centers; and a focus on value-added products.

To succeed, Kansas will have to examine the actual costs to its society of all decisions. For instance, coal currently is a cheap method of producing electricity, but what will be the costs of cleaning the air? Experts will analyze the Wal-Mart phenomenon and the actual cost in terms of the loss of rural Main Street businesses and costs of individuals' travels to purchase cheaper goods away from home.

Kansas will make a concerted effort to assist small businesses with capital and start-up incentives, and build economic leadership. Iowa will be examined as a model for small-business investment and rural economic





development programs, including tax breaks. Kansas will develop mentor and apprentice programs, fostering role models for prospective entrepreneurs. Existing programs at the state's universities and community colleges will be enlisted in this venture. Entrepreneurial education will be promoted at all levels, including K–12, higher education, and adult continuing education. There will be a focus on incorporating minorities into new business ventures. Efforts will be made to reduce redundancy and eliminate duplication of services.

Action Steps

- Develop incentives for investing in small business through Kansas Small Business Development Centers.
- Call on the state's universities, community colleges, and technical schools to provide services that will train rural people.
- Establish a statewide resources center/clearinghouse (Rural Economic Center) with a toll-free number and website for sharing of resources.
- Promote a system of "angel investors" through meetings to showcase rural potential.
- Enrich and promote the Santa Fe Trail.
- Establish a School of Rural Entrepreneurship.
- Encourage all Kansas banks to become interested in agricultural and entrepreneurial-oriented businesses.

The Story of Rural Kansas: Energy

The Past

In many ways, the energy picture in Kansas may be coming full cycle. The earliest human inhabitants relied on biomass for energy, burning buffalo chips, wood and brush to produce fire. Today the focus is turning back to increased focus on alternative sources of energy.

Early settlers from other states and other nations also relied on biomass and food/calorie energy. Horses, mules and oxen provided power in towns and on farms. Wind power soon joined rural Kansans' energy arsenal. It was first used as direct power to pump water, then later to generate electricity.

Some early Kansans relied on surface water, as many towns sprang up around water-driven mills. Gradually, animal power for farming and transportation was replaced, first by steam, and then by internal combustion engines.

At about the same time, centrally produced electricity came first to the towns and cities, then later to the rural areas. With the advent of the internal combustion engine and electrical power, the demand for coal, oil, natural gas and nuclear energy increased, bringing us to the present.

The Present

Economic factors and decreasing supplies have reduced the importance of Kansas' oil and gas reserves, but Kansas still has abundant opportunities for energy production. According to some studies, it has the most potential for wind production of any state in the nation. Wise development of wind energy facilities can help individual rural Kansans and contribute to a balanced energy supply in Kansas.

Opportunities for alternative fuel production are great. Kansas farmers continue to produce abundant crops. Production of ethanol and biodiesel is increasing. More than 40 percent of the nation's cattle move through Kansas, providing access to biomass and methane. Coal bed methane is also available, as is the technology for its development.

Human resources are also abundant in Kansas. The "can-do" spirit that tamed the wilderness is still found here, and we have excellent educational opportunities and technical skills.

At the same time, there are some weaknesses. Although there is real potential for wind energy, sites must be chosen carefully to maintain the environment and overcome some "not in my backyard" resistance through careful and wise site decisions.

Some energy policies seem misplaced, like some which seem to reward inefficiency, for example, and spirited debates occur about how much regulation is too much regulation. The state's oil and gas reserves are dwindling, making Kansas dependant on imported energy.





The Future

In the future, Kansans will continue to produce energy for their own consumption as well as for export. The tax and pricing structure will encourage end-use efficiency and wise production. Efficiency will be the watchword in both production and consumption. Cogeneration in smaller, dispersed power plants will enable Kansans to combine heat and power production, and capture carbon dioxide.

Kansans realize that the fossil fuel resources in the state are limited. In the near term, although oil and gas production will continue, it will be augmented by the production of ethanol and biodiesel. Technology now allows for the recovery of coalbed methane and tertiary oil. The economic effect of these technologies will benefit rural landowners and the state as a whole.

In the longer term, the production of energy will be diverse and regionalized. Smaller communities will utilize wind and biomass to produce energy, but still will be connected to larger power grids. Wind and biomass energy will be used to produce hydrogen as the demand increases. Just as Kansans have always combined creativity and fortitude to reach the stars, Kansas will combine technology and resources to lead the nation in wise energy production and consumption.

Action Steps

- Support an energy plan for Kansas.
- Focus efforts on regionalized energy production and policy.
- Support the continuance and augmentation of the State Energy Resources Coordination Council (SERCC).
- Support SERCC's work to institutionalize the development of a comprehensive and coordinated energy policy for Kansas, including wind energy, ethanol, coalbed methane and tertiary oil recovery.
- The state should develop a proactive and adequate regulatory program to guide development of new energy sources at their birth, rather than being forced to focus on cleanup and remediation as these resources wane.
- Consider financing needed energy action with severance tax revenues associated with new development.
- Increase the focus on energy conservation and efficiency.

The Story of Rural Kansas: Health Care

The Past

The first residents of this state were Native American Indians for whom shamans and “medicine men” provided a form of holistic health care. For the early settlers, physicians were few and midwives helped birth new Kansans.

Kansas was one of the first states to have a public health system and should be considered a pioneer, largely because of Dr. Samuel Crumrine’s public health efforts, such as eliminating common towels and drinking cups from public places and prohibiting spitting on the bricks. Dr. Crumrine brought public health education to the forefront in Kansas and the rest of the nation in the early 1900s.

Kansas was one of the earliest states in which physicians made house calls. Soon, doctors began to establish treatment centers or hospitals in their homes, but this was phased out through legislation which made wood-frame hospitals illegal in the early 1950s. In the early years, health care institutions included “soldiers’ homes,” county “poor farms,” state hospitals for mental health care, VA hospitals, and mineral water spas.

In the 1950s, the federal Hill-Burton Act provided grants to develop hospitals in every region. In the 1970s, a “certificate of need” program stipulated that if a cost increase was requested by a hospital, the reasons had to be proven and approved by community hospital councils. This program was repealed in 1985.

In the 1980s, some hospitals closed because of the implementation of diagnostic related groups (DRGs) that paid hospitals a flat fee based on diagnosis. Home health agencies also became reimbursable on a per-visit basis.


The Menninger Institute in Topeka was a role model for mental health care for many decades. Its departure from the state has caused waves that are still reverberating in the mental health care community.

Faith-based hospitals grew in response to community need and then declined as huge corporate chains began buying up hospitals. A few hospitals still remain, but religious institutions continue to respond to needs through nursing homes and retirement communities.

Present Strengths

Rural hospitals are the first point of contact for serious health needs in rural Kansas. Kansas has excellent personalization of health care, with one-on-one care a great strength. Some studies have shown that rural residents appear to heal faster and better because of the personalized care they receive. In rural hospitals, some with as few as 30 beds, most patients are known to the health care professionals and vice versa.





When the technology or specialized expertise provided in a larger, regional hospital is needed to treat a particular condition, rural hospitals can transfer patients to appropriate medical facilities that provide the care not available locally.

To be competitive and to meet needs and demands, some rural health centers have been proactive, providing family-based care, health and fitness, and day care services.

Emergency medical services (EMS) are available in many parts of the state. EMS personnel in rural communities are able to serve residents well, in part because the personnel know the residents of their own communities.

Technology, including the Internet and compressed video teleconferencing, makes it possible for some rural health care practitioners to be linked with experts in urban areas to supplement and improve their expertise so they may continue to provide high levels of care.

Present Weaknesses

In one study, Kansas recently was ranked 47th in the nation for its quality of health care related to some specific diagnoses. This is a serious issue that needs aggressive improvement.

The state continues to have a strong need to attract physicians to rural communities and keep them there. Programs from the KU Medical Center in Wichita and Kansas City provide educational grants for medical students who agree to practice in rural areas.

Twenty percent of Kansas hospitals don't qualify for the federal Critical Access Hospital (CAH) program because of hospital size and length of patient stay. CAH is a program which supports rural hospitals by allowing participating hospitals to receive cost reimbursement for the percentage of Medicare patients receiving those hospital services. The program has not brought the complete relief initially anticipated.

Some employees of businesses in rural areas do not have sufficient health insurance. Premium rates may be too high for small companies to bear, and some rural incomes may be too low for individuals to afford insurance. Small companies are trying to build coalitions with larger companies to help them carry the premium load. Some suggest the state should intervene to keep insurance costs affordable.

There is disparity in availability of health care from one community to the next, inadequacy in communication among health institutions, and lack of transportation for patients who require specialized services from rural communities to health care institutions in other areas. Patients may have to travel great distances for specialized care such as chemotherapy or radiation.

Rural people may be reluctant to seek mental health care, treatment for substance addiction, or protection from domestic abuse because of a perceived lack of privacy or anonymity.

Dentistry, mental health services and transportation to specialized medical care facilities also are greatly underserved in many rural areas.

National data show that incidences of teenage pregnancy, obesity, alcoholism, smoking, and drug use may be greater in rural America than in less isolated urban areas.

Quality of care in some rural nursing homes may be inadequate, perhaps because the frequency of inspection also may be lower in rural community facilities.

The Future

Kansas rural leaders want the state to become a leader in quality of care—addressing the whole population but focusing on the most vulnerable, including senior residents and children. We must measure and communicate the state’s current status, even where it may be dismal, to begin the process of change.

Health care improvement will hinge on the dedicated involvement of all sectors in Kansas—business and industry, state and local government, churches, schools, local communities, and individuals.

Kansas must address the costs of health insurance. Insurance premiums should be based on behavioral risk, not age or location alone.

The state will use high-speed Internet to link service providers, but hardware and software must be compatible and accessible.

Every Kansan must have access to emergency care, regardless of ability to pay. There also will be needs for universal availability of bilingual health care providers or translators.

Redefining “community” may be crucial so that “community clusters” can more efficiently tackle health care problems on a regional basis.

Availability and quality of health care greatly influence other facets of rural life, including decisions made by individuals and business and industry about where to locate their businesses and homes.

Action Steps

- Uniform insurance forms.
- A review of insurance regulations.
- Effective, fair allocation of health care resources.
- Risk-based insurance premiums.
- Consider further bans on smoking in public areas.
- A fully funded Kansas Senior Care Act with in-home health care provisions.
- Addressing the cost of prescription drugs.
- Means to link health care centers (communication, transportation, other accessibility).
- A center for marketing and recruitment of medical, nursing, and allied health professionals.





- Ensuring that health care (emergency care at a minimum) is provided to all Kansans, especially children and the elderly.
- A “services bank” so people can volunteer their help for the needy.
- A governor’s Good Health Program with incentives for communities that set health goals.
- A “meals on wheels”-style program that mails preserved foods to elderly people who are presently not served because of their rural locations.
- Consideration of community-based health plans.

The Story of Rural Kansas: Human Services

Overview

The task force defined “human services” as providing for the basic human needs of all Kansans. The discussion was not limited to Kansans who use the social service—or “welfare”—system. Human services include in-home health care, food banks, food and shelter for transient people, domestic violence protection, youth care facilities, disaster assistance, meals on wheels, transportation to and from health care facilities, SRS offices, foster care, adequate dwellings or shelter, and recreation.

The Past

Human services traditionally were provided through the nuclear family, the extended family, and churches. Later, communities, governments and churches began to provide county orphanages, “poor farms,” state hospitals for mental health care, reformatories for women, and soup kitchens (especially during the Great Depression). Entities such as the Salvation Army and the Red Cross arose to help provide services.

The “orphan trains” passed through Kansas, bringing urban children in need of homes and services. Various disease epidemics, including influenza, polio, and tuberculosis, taxed the health care system. Providing for human services was a focus of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal (with its Civilian Conservation Corps) and of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Along the way, the state entered the business of human services, with various agencies evolving into the modern Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.

Present Strengths

Rural Kansas has an environment that is generally considered safe, with low crime rates, a strong sense of community—everyone working together for the common good, pride in local history, strong family networks, and relatively inexpensive land and housing. Rural Kansans often leave home to obtain their educations, but some do return back home to live and work—particularly in the rural communities of 5,000 or more, as well as communities geographically closer to urban centers.

Increasing numbers of people are retiring “back home” to Kansas. In a strange twist, correctional facilities are increasingly sited in rural areas and are seen as pivotal economic development tools. They bring stable jobs with them.

Present Weaknesses

The subdivision of land as farmers retire is driving up the cost of farmland and making it difficult for new farmers to get started. Rural Kansas lacks contractors with comprehensive construction skills. Housing





is seen as quite affordable by higher-income people migrating to rural areas from the city, but as unaffordable by low-income rural residents, first-time buyers, and the elderly. In small towns, some people buy up large quantities of land and housing and rent it at great profit. Ironically, these buyers often are the community leaders (mayor or city/county commissioners).

Kansas is the only state in the nation that does not have a state housing finance agency (HFA). Mortgage revenue bonds, as a result, have been issued through urban counties and are not available to many rural communities; in general there is little creativity about bond issues and financing.

There can be closed-mindedness in small communities. In a related way, the rural culture tends to tolerate domestic violence and other forms of abuse, protecting the perpetrators and making it embarrassing and difficult for victims to find help. Too few mental health treatment options exist when people do ask for help.

Delivery of human services, such as food stamps, sometimes occurs in a demeaning way. Lack of anonymity hurts the pride of people taking advantage of services. Because of this, many eligible recipients do not receive food stamps and other services that could benefit their families.

The presence of increasing numbers of immigrants creates many needs, such as bilingual services and low-cost housing. For these and other rural people, enforcement of sanitary and housing codes is inadequate in many areas.

Utilities tend to be expensive. Rural electric cooperatives are contracting to build coal-fired technology. At the same time, out-of-state companies are investing in the future of Kansas wind-powered energy technology.

Youths leave home for work or higher education and, as a rule, do not return.

The Future

Kansas will establish more human service referral networks, including domestic violence shelters, so all providers of services know what is available, where it is, and how to help people access it. Emergency care providers and law enforcement personnel also will be comprehensively informed about human service options.

There will be adequate housing for everyone, and it will start with a state housing finance agency. Mortgage revenue bonds will be available statewide, and banks will be able to participate in the MRB program without pre-purchasing loan authority, so they become as comfortable loaning money for housing as for purchases of cattle. More facilities, such as abandoned schools, will be renovated into housing for the elderly. Kansans will explore new models for senior housing to fill the gap between independent living and licensed assisted living and nursing homes.

Wellness centers (rather than hospitals caring for the already ill) will be a focal point, and more outpatient mental health facilities and case workers will be available. This may occur through “community clusters” in which communities share resources.

Computers and access to the Internet will become standard in all homes.

Emergency medical services will be even better and faster, with more full-time EMS personnel. Rural Kansas will have better crisis care outside the daytime office hours, as well as more level one and level two trauma centers.

The Kansas Senior Care Act will be fully funded, and transportation options for the elderly will be expanded. State government will find a way to help relieve the high costs of prescription drugs.

More food banks will be established to support the hungry people of rural Kansas and the Heartland Share Program will be expanded and made available to all.

Creative alternative programs for youth will be developed.

Action Steps

- Form a Kansas Housing Finance Agency and make mortgage revenue bonds and other housing finance options and programs available statewide. Support Senate Bill 222 in the 2004 legislative session, or similar legislation designed to help low- and moderate-income families purchase homes.
- Hold a statewide assessment of need.
- Create more human service coalitions.
- Fully fund the Senior Care Act.
- Publicize existing programs, such as Heartland Share.
- Initiate community conversations about empowerment. Help rural communities learn what has worked in other towns to enable communities to make informed decisions.
- Explore new models of senior housing at all ranges between independent living, assisted living, and skilled care in nursing homes.
- Ask major corporations to decentralize, allowing employees or employee groups to relocate to and work from small towns.
- Develop a program to supplement the cost of prescription drugs.





The Story of Rural Kansas: Infrastructure

Introduction

For the purposes of discussion, the Rural Life Task Force defined infrastructure as the installations necessary to sustain a community. Infrastructure includes elements such as roads, highways, rail, and air transportation; telephone and other telecommunication systems; sewage and water systems; and housing.

The Past

The earliest transportation infrastructure in Kansas probably took the form of the game trails followed by Native American Indians. As new settlers moved into the region, more permanent trails, such as the Oregon and Santa Fe, crossed the territory. With the influx of settlers taking advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862, section roads were developed. Cattle trails provided another pathway. When forts were established, military trails were developed to link them. Rail transportation further altered the infrastructure, as water and fueling stations were established to supply trains passing through the state.

In 1917, the state legislature established the Kansas Department of Transportation and a system of state highways. President Dwight D. Eisenhower led the development of the Interstate highway system following World War II so the country would have the potential to move ground troops and land airplanes more easily in case of war.

Communities developed around sources of water for drinking, transportation and milling; rail lines; and cattle movement and production. County seats were sited based on a perceived need for all people to be able to travel to the county seat and back home on horseback in one day. Today, with modern transportation, it now seems the state has a high number of counties.

With increasing numbers of persons settling in Kansas, communication became important. The Pony Express, and then the telegraph, began to link communities. As a testament to the importance of communication, early settlements, before the establishment of formal communities, often had post office sites only five miles apart.

As villages became towns and towns became cities, by the early 1900s the need for centralized water and sewage became apparent. Rural water districts were required to get water to areas of limited groundwater. Without rural water districts, those areas of the state could not develop and be productive, then or now.

Electricity became commonplace by the 1940s and 1950s in rural areas through the help and establishment of Rural Electric Cooperatives, also allowing rural Kansas to develop. The landscape was also altered with tree plantings and other conservation efforts through the government-sponsored Civilian Conservation Corps camps of the 1930s.

Present Strengths

Kansas has the best roads, highways and bridges in the region. The amount of grain storage is one of its strengths, as are the state's 144 airports of all sizes. They provide both transportation and emergency health care through air ambulance. Open spaces are strengths for reasons both of esthetics and economics, as potential development sites.

Kansas' rural water situation is controversial; some view it positively in terms of quality and quantity, others express significant concerns. There are rural hospitals in towns of all sizes. The state's rail lines, although reduced in numbers, run across the entire state and are working. The education system is strong in Kansas.

A more subtle form of infrastructure is the friendly spirit of the people of rural Kansas, including their generosity, helpfulness, ingenuity and work ethic.

Present Weaknesses

Although Kansas seems to have adequate numbers of major highways, rural roads are not always well maintained. In some communities, scarce resources are allocated to little-used roads, perhaps unwisely, and some roads are the responsibility of untrained maintenance crews.

The general excellence of Kansas highways, particularly interstate highways, has a flip-side weakness. These highways have diverted traffic and tourism from many rural communities. Rural towns have seen retail businesses vacate traditional business districts for locations closer to highways, resulting in the growing decay of their commercial centers.

The state's tax structure is damaging to rural areas because state sales taxes are not being returned to rural communities on an equitable basis. There is a serious tax burden on real estate.

Water cooperatives have distribution problems and some lakes have pollution issues, including silting and the presence of certain chemicals. Some natural gas underground lines are too close to the surface and some crude oil lines are not in good shape. Short-line rail has been abandoned or fallen into neglect throughout much of the state. Intrastate or especially short-line rail operations should be upgraded, because short lines are needed to transport agricultural products and protect highways.

Housing stock is better in some rural areas than in others; in most rural communities, 50 to 75 percent of the housing is 40 years or older, making it substandard by definition.

The Future

The theme for the future of Kansas infrastructure is to tie the strengths of Kansas' past to its future. No one wants to return to the past, but the traditional virtues are timeless. Thrift and commitment to home,





community, and family will remain hallmarks of Kansas. The goal is to revitalize the soul of rural communities, in these ways:

Some roads may need to be abandoned and the land returned to rural landowners. Liability on secondary roads may need to be limited.

Given the realities of modern transportation and communication, “community” may be redefined to include clusters, in which towns band together to provide services to their common areas. Such clusters would help provide infrastructure links to the wider world, especially in the arena of telecommunication and broadband Internet services. Establishing these communication networks will increase educational efficiency and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Geographic information systems (GIS) could be used to help understand the infrastructure needs and opportunities of Kansans. Maps showing population densities and location of resources, for instance, would be a helpful long-range planning resource.

Mortgage lending bonds will be made available statewide to increase housing stock. The state will improve its rural housing stock by protecting historic buildings and local homesteading programs will attract people who value the rural lifestyle. Rural communities should continue to place great value on maintaining places of historic significance, including cemeteries.

Because of NAFTA and better trade opportunities, Kansas may become more vital in a central North American trade corridor between Mexico and Canada. This makes it important to continue to improve state transportation systems, including air.

Water supplies could be imperiled if the state experienced a prolonged drought. Planning for the future in terms of appropriation of water quantity and maintenance of water quality must be a priority for Kansas.

The state must continue promoting its climate, uniqueness, sense of community, family values, clean air, beautiful sunrises and sunsets, silence, and vast, clear night skies.

Action Steps

- The use patterns of rural roads should be analyzed to determine if costs of town or county maintenance efforts are justified.
- Communities should consider clustering together to access services for their common areas, such as telecommunications and broadband Internet services.
- Mortgage lending bonds should be made available statewide.
- The use of geographic information systems should be encouraged to analyze the infrastructure needs of rural Kansas.
- Water quality and quantity should be protected.

The Story of Rural Kansas: Rural Government

The Past

The earliest Kansas “governments” occurred among Native American Indian tribes. For settlers of European background, Kansas government began with territorial homesteading, followed by the formation of townships and ranges, cities and counties. Town and city sites usually were chosen because of the presence of water or the railroad, although many towns began because of a feature of natural beauty that drew their founders to them. Cities of the first, second, and third class were designated.

Kansas has 105 counties, 626 incorporated towns, and numerous school districts, water districts, fire districts, and township boards—which means a fairly large number of local governments per capita. Under the Kansas Constitution, home rule is a right. Any local government can pass any law not in conflict with state law. “Wars” over the location of county seats have occurred periodically, as recently as 1963 in Logan County.

Forms of government have shifted over time, encompassing the strong mayor, weak mayor, city/county commission, and city administrator forms, among others. Many still coexist in mix-and-match fashion. City governments and school boards tend to be nonpartisan, but county elections are partisan.

Present Strengths

Local government is a primary and relatively stable linchpin of many economies throughout the state, including rural jurisdictions. County courthouses and school districts employ many rural people.

Rural government has certain noteworthy strengths. There is considerable local control. The people tend to be an informed electorate, when they wish to be informed or when they have a specific issue they are concerned about or opinion they wish to express. They are knowledgeable about the candidates’ private lives.

Participation in rural politics is democracy in its finest sense, precisely because office does not require a formal educational background and is widely accessible to candidates, in part because the scale of rural politics is small and manageable. Because elected officials are known to the voters, they generally feel extremely accountable. Officials tend to be altruistic and dedicated people who do not run for the money—which is nominal or nonexistent—or the prestige. Officials are just a phone call away and usually make themselves accessible. There is a widespread concept of “servant leadership.”

Rural governments tend to be frugal and to work within real budgets. It is not deemed acceptable to run in the red.





The Kansas Association of Counties is helpful in strategizing, training new commissioners, and providing in-service workshops. The League of Kansas Municipalities, with its Municipal League Academy, is a valuable asset, as are the training programs offered by the Association of County Clerks, the Association of City Managers, and specialized programs offered by Wichita State University and the University of Kansas Public Management Center in Topeka.

Some areas are beginning to see the need for alliances with other areas in order to meet their needs with limited resources. In one instance, the five towns in a county united to build a water treatment center.

Present Weaknesses

Governments, including rural government entities, are not always run professionally; sometimes they operate without a budget. Decision-making and priority-setting can be extremely difficult or nonexistent. Often there is lack of direction.

Controversies arise easily from misunderstandings. Sometimes this follows a newspaper story or when a radio announcer expounds incorrectly on the outcome of a public meeting. Sometimes, opinions expressed at the local coffee shop may be wrong.

Long-term planning may be poorly done, or not done at all. There sometimes is a lack of vision which can occur at the state, city, or county levels. This shortsightedness can have dire consequences.

For example, the state now faces a multimillion dollar revenue shortfall, which has resulted in all cities and counties losing state transfer payments. This problem may have been exacerbated by last year's hasty passage of the "destination-based" sales tax, depriving many rural jurisdictions of even more revenue. At the local level, one rural community voted down a \$9 million bond issue; a decade later, the same construction required a \$24 million bond.

The culture fosters a political climate that says government is suspect and corrupt; many voters do not understand government and react to it in a knee-jerk way. Decisions can be based on bias and long-standing conflict grounded in sports or school rivalries. There is a general terror of raising taxes.

There are many fine legislators and county and city commissioners, but lack of knowledge and professionalism among some other public officials can impede our development. Voters may be hesitant to hire a professional county administrator. Some of these inept officials refuse to attend meetings of county officials or to network with others. Horror stories include commissioners who are illiterate or unethical in influencing voting. Residents have been known to run for public office simply to obtain health insurance, which is a sad commentary on the status of affordable health care.

Because newcomers to rural communities are not always embraced, they tend not to run for office; government sometimes remains in the hands of an entrenched few. A dearth of local jobs means that young people leave the area and are not available to refresh the lifeblood of government by volunteering. That means a core of civic-minded people may do all the work until they burn out.

Rural officials usually do not have the time or expertise to research the availability of grants and foundation funding for community improvements. Participation in the Kansas Association of Counties is not required, and some do not take advantage of the resources it offers.

There is considerable duplication of services from government entities in both urban and rural areas of the state. Little action has been taken in urban areas to save the state or local taxpayers money by consolidating governments or services. In some rural areas, consolidation may be needed because regions lack a “critical mass” of population, although new and different economic development strategies may be able to halt or reverse population loss in some rural areas of the state. Currently, much consolidation is happening with unwilling participants, just because of economic necessity. Many residents don’t trust the consolidated units.

The Future

Kansas is on the cusp of change with regard to rural government: it either can stay with the status quo, or it can create bold new alternatives. Ideas abound for improving rural government. Strategies may range from formation of alliances through “community clusters” for particular projects or more general government, adopting joint city/county governments, and, in extreme cases, consolidation of very challenged and economically unsustainable jurisdictions.

These shifts should not be mandated, but promoted with incentives. The shifts must occur in a way that does not reduce the political control and accountability that rural people currently have. The task force recognizes that some strategies may further reduce employment opportunities in already distressed rural economies. They should be adopted only after careful consideration of alternatives and only after consultation with local constituencies.

The state should offer financial incentives that adopt effective economic and community development strategies to successfully reverse population loss and stabilize local economies. In the meantime, the state could provide financial incentives to any jurisdiction, urban or rural, that shows it can save money and improve services by choosing to adopt one or more of these strategies.

Because of the state’s current revenue problems, the costs of government units at all levels—state, urban, and rural—will have to be scrutinized by the responsible parties. Tough decisions have to be made





regarding the level of state support to all units of local government and the continued existence of some entities. For greater efficiency, duplication of services will have to be documented and reconsidered.

Throughout this process, however, it will be necessary not to drive the final nail into the economic coffin of distressed rural communities, when restraint and innovative development strategies offer a reasonable prospect for stabilization and growth.

Action Steps

- Implement a program of Rural Economic and Community Development designed to stabilize and build rural economies and populations.
- Make sure that rural counties get their fair share of the Economic Development Incentive Funds (EDIF) collected through the Kansas lottery.
- Celebrate existing examples of outstanding rural government leadership and innovation and share them widely as inspiration to others. Duplicate specific successful strategies in other jurisdictions when appropriate.
- Develop a permanent, statewide town meeting-style program of education about successful rural development, stabilization, and governance strategies, including exchanges among existing rural city and county staffs, to increase knowledge and awareness on specific issues. Hold brainstorming/strategy sessions, open to the public, with key elected officials always present.
- Require or enable city and county officials to get training through the Kansas Association of Counties, the League of Kansas Municipalities, other professional associations, and universities. Fund that training.
- Include rural governance in school curricula at all levels.
- Make the “Kids Vote” program more widespread.
- Make professional mediators available for all communities in conflict with one another if they request mediation.
- When considering alliances, partnerships, or consolidation, do it within a “do no harm” imperative;; there can be no loss of political power, revenue, or economic activity that would imperil a rural community.
- Remove obstacles to public service by raising the salaries of some rural officials, such as county commissioners, so they are paid a better level of compensation. Incentives will encourage public officials to obtain continuing education and to network.